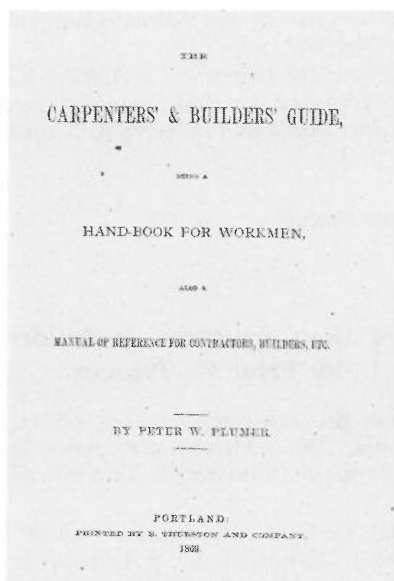


# A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



## Peter W. Plumer 1825-1873

During the nineteenth century, Maine produced only a handful of publications relating to the building trades.<sup>1</sup> Of these, by far the most popular was *The Carpenters' and Builders' Guide* by Peter W. Plumer, an obscure Portland carpenter. Between its appearance in 1869 and 1885, eight authorized editions are known to have been printed along with a "pirated" version.

Little record has survived of the man responsible for this important book. Peter Woodbury Plumer was born in Danville on March 18, 1825, the third of nine children of Thomas J. and Hannah Small Plumer.<sup>2</sup> By 1850 Peter Plumer had moved to Portland, where he is listed in the city directory for that year as a ship carpenter, a trade he practiced at least until 1856. Subsequent directories from 1858 through 1871 note him simply as a carpenter. On July 11, 1858, Plumer married Mary Jane Libby of Portland, who bore him a son Frederic Edgar, later to become a local musician.<sup>3</sup>

During the Civil War, rapidly rising inflation caused the working men of Portland to seek higher wages in an organized fashion. "Prices of labor not being proportionate with the increased expenses of living" resulted in a May, 1863 meeting of what would become the Journeymen House Carpenters'

Association.<sup>4</sup> At that meeting the carpenters adopted a \$2.00 per day wage scale effective June 1st. They also voted to strike if this wage was not met. Apparently Peter Plumer was actively involved in this labor movement, for when the carpenters convened again on December 4th to review their wage scale, he was elected secretary of the organization.<sup>5</sup> While the Association agreed at this meeting to maintain its rates during the winter of 1863-64, it felt compelled to raise them to \$2.50 per day in April, 1864 and ten percent above that in August of the same year.<sup>6</sup>

As the Civil War drew to a close, economic conditions in Portland worsened for the city's working men. In response to this crisis, Peter Plumer and many other tradesmen formed a short-lived political action group known as the Portland Labor Reform Association.<sup>7</sup> Plumer's is the fourth name on the dues roster drawn up in February, 1865. In addition to individual memberships, the Association received financial support from such diverse groups as the Journeymen House Carpenters' Association, the Fenian Brotherhood, the Printers Union, and the Iron Moulders. The Labor Reform Association's new constitution boldly stated its purpose as follows:

Whereas in the present unsettled and distracted state of our country, questions and circumstances have arisen, and will arise, intimately affecting the interests of the Industrial Classes of this community, and it being of vital importance to the welfare of these classes, that they should be able at any and all times to exact an influence that should be felt upon all such questions and circumstances as well as upon all acts of the City, State and National Governments...<sup>8</sup>

The Portland Labor Reform Association lasted only through January of 1867. In the meantime, Peter Plumer had joined the more established Maine Charitable Mechanic Association on June 8, 1866.<sup>9</sup> Plumer's membership in the Journeymen House Carpenters' Association, the Labor Reform Association, and the Charitable Mechanic Association reflects a growing concern for the welfare of his fellow workmen which would culminate in his *Carpenters' and Builders' Guide*.

The *Guide* first appeared in Portland in 1869 with Peter Plumer as author and publisher. Subtitled "A

Hand-Book for Workmen'', the 40 page volume encompasses estimating methods, a glossary of architectural terms, drafting problems, and a hand railing system.

Referring to his ''twenty years' actual experience as a carpenter'', Plumer asserted that in his book ''no article has been inserted, nor suggestion made, that is not of the highest practical value to workmen.''<sup>10</sup> He closed his preface with the following appropriate words:

Therefore, with due regard for the interests of workmen, and a sincere desire for their advancement, together with a better understanding of the principles of their profession, to the carpenters and builders generally, this little book is respectfully dedicated by THE AUTHOR.<sup>11</sup>

The first edition of the *Guide* was sold by Peter Plumer himself at his 100 Federal Street shop. Apparently it met with immediate success, for the Portland publishers Hoyt, Fogg, and Breed issued another edition in 1869. This firm, later to be known as Hoyt, Fogg, and Donham, published subsequent editions in 1870, 1872, 1875, 1879, 1883, and 1885.

Several of these editions were distributed by New York publishers, including the 1872 by the American News Company and the 1875, 1879, and 1883 by the Orange Judd Company. The latter firm was one of America's leading late nineteenth century publishers and distributors of architectural books. So popular was the *Guide* that in 1870 George A. Hall published it verbatim under his own name in New York, omitting only the preface. While no record has been found of how Hall priced this ''pirated'' edition, authorized ones never sold for more than a dollar, in keeping with Plumer's intention that they be easily available to workmen.

It is doubtful that Peter W. Plumer ever received any significant monetary return from the *Guide*. All indications are that he continued to live a modest life as a carpenter until his death on February 1, 1873, shortly before his 48th birthday.<sup>12</sup> He left no property nor any record of the vessels and buildings upon which he worked. His contribution to his contemporaries and his legacy to Maine's architectural history are the eight editions of his *Carpenters' and Builders' Guide*.

Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr.  
November, 1984

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Other publications include:

*Housewrights' Rules of Work for the Town of Portland*, Portland: Printed by Jenks and Shirley, 1805. 28 p.

*Housewrights' Rules of Work for the Town of Portland*, Portland: Printed by A. & J. Shirley, 1819. 24 p.

Benjamin Hale, *Introduction to the Mechanical Principles of Carpentry*, Gardiner: P. Sheldon, printer, 1827. 182 p.

<sup>2</sup> Sidney Perley, *The Plumer Genealogy*, Salem: The Essex Institute, 1917, p. 178.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Portland Daily Press*, May 25, 1863.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, December 5, 1863.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, April 8, 1864; July 30, 1864.

<sup>7</sup> The manuscript record book of the Portland Labor Reform Association covering the period 1865 to 1867 is in a private collection.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Membership records of the Maine Charitable Mechanic Association, Portland.

<sup>10</sup> Peter W. Plumer, *The Carpenters' & Builders' Guide, Being a Hand-Book for Workmen, Also a Manual of Reference for Contractors, Builders, Etc.*, Portland: Printed by B. Thurston and Company, 1869, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Perley, *Plumer Genealogy...*, p. 178.

## Editions of *The Carpenters' & Builders' Guide* by Peter W. Plumer

Peter W. Plumer, *The Carpenters' & Builders' Guide, Being a Hand-Book for Workmen, Also a Manual of Reference for Contractors, Builders, Etc.*, Portland: Printed by B. Thurston and Company, 1869. 40 p.

Peter W. Plumer, *The Carpenters' & Builders' Guide, Being a Hand-Book for Workmen, Also a Manual of Reference for Contractors, Builders, Etc.*, Portland: Hoyt, Fogg & Breed, Publishers, 92 Middle Street, 1869. 40 p.

Peter W. Plumer, *The Carpenters' and Builders' Guide, Being a Hand-Book for Workmen, Also a Manual of Reference for Contractors, Builders, Etc.*, Portland: Hoyt, Fogg & Breed, Publishers, 1870. Second Edition. 72 p.

Peter W. Plumer, *The Carpenters' and Builders' Guide, Being a Hand-Book for Workmen, Also, a Manual of Reference for Contractors, Builders, Etc.*, Portland: Hoyt, Fogg & Donham, Publishers; New York: Am. News Company, 1872. Third Edition. 72 p.

Peter W. Plummer, *The Carpenters' and Builders' Guide, Being a Hand-Book for Workmen, Also a Manual of Reference for Contractors, Builders, Etc.*, Portland: Hoyt, Fogg & Donham, Publishers; New York: Orange Judd Company, 1875, Fourth Edition. 72 p.

Peter W. Plummer, *The Carpenters' and Builders' Guide, Being a Hand-Book for Workmen, Also a Manual of Reference for Contractors, Builders, Etc.*, Portland: Hoyt, Fogg & Donham, Publishers; New York: Orange Judd Company, 245 Broadway, 1879. 72 p.

Peter W. Plummer, *The Carpenters' and Builders' Guide, Being a Hand-Book for Workmen, Also a Manual of Reference for Contractors, Builders, Etc.*, Portland: Hoyt, Fogg & Donham, Publishers; New York: Orange Judd Company, 751 Broadway, 1883. 72 p.

Peter W. Plummer, *The Carpenters' and Builders' Guide, Being a Hand-Book for Workmen, Also a Manual of Reference for Contractors, Builders, Etc.*, Portland: Hoyt, Fogg & Donham, Publishers, 1885. 72 p.

## ''Pirated'' Edition

George A. Hall, *The Carpenters' and Builders' Guide; Being a Hand-book for Workmen, Also a Manual of Reference for Contractors, Builders, Etc.*, New York: Published by the Author, 1870. 48 p.

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